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Hemisphere's Security Tied to CAFTA's Passage
Commentary by Secretary Donald Rumsfeld

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to visit the countries of Central America many times. Not too long ago, the region was torn by civil strife and ruled by authoritarian regimes. I remember well the decades when the United States was concerned about a growing trend toward Marxist radicalism in the region, and the implications for American and hemispheric security.

Yet, in the past two decades, the countries of Central America have transformed themselves in impressive ways -- which is a credit above all to their industrious and determined people. Dictatorships have given way to democracies, and rivalries that once threatened stability are now relics of the past. Central American leaders look for opportunities to cooperate with each other and the United States in many fields: economic, scientific and military. Indeed, many sent troops to Iraq and have supported other coalition efforts in the global struggle against violent extremism.

In the coming days, the U.S. Congress will consider approval of the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Though it may be unusual for a secretary of defense to comment on trade agreements, I consider CAFTA's passage vital to continued stability, security and democracy in Latin America -- and therefore to overall U.S. strategic interests.

In short, I consider CAFTA to be as much a security issue as it is an economic issue -- for them and for us. By approving CAFTA, the United States will bolster the advocates of freedom and openness in Latin America.

Rejection of the agreement, conversely, could seriously undermine the forces of freedom and lead to an era of increased transnational security challenges.

History has shown that political reform, security and economic progress are inextricably linked; one is unlikely to endure and be successful without the others. Indeed, if one were to look down on the Earth from Mars, one would see that the countries that have relatively free political systems and relatively free economic systems are the nations where their people generally do well. They have greater opportunity and live peacefully with their neighbors. And they serve as models for millions of others who seek but do not have free systems.

If Central America is to consolidate the progress it has made in the past few decades, its people need to feel the tangible benefits of democratic systems. The countries in the region remain relatively poor, and a continued lack of economic opportunity could eventually make these nations once again vulnerable to instability and strife, with serious consequences for the entire hemisphere.

President Bush and members of the Cabinet have outlined well the economic benefits of CAFTA -- for the United States as well as for Central America and the Dominican Republic. As secretary of defense, I see CAFTA as a strategic necessity as well.

This period has been called a "magic moment" for Central America. The rise of a free and peaceful Central America has allowed the United States to form alliances to combat drug traffickers, hostage takers, gangs and terrorists -- antisocial combinations that threaten our country as well. Strengthening links between the United States and Central America would further undermine the efforts of those seeking to return Central American governments to the days of corruption, lawlessness and hostility toward the United States.

Central Americans were among the first to stand with us after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 -- offering support and friendship. Central American countries helped restore order and peace in Haiti, and they are working with the United States in military partnerships within and outside the region. As our country continues to take the offense against the violent extremism that is threatening civilized societies, we have been able to do so confident that our own hemisphere is a zone of peace and freedom.

In my view, a rejection of CAFTA would do more than simply bring this cooperation and much of the region's progress to a halt. Our neighbors do not live in a vacuum, and they are facing many pressures to turn away from a pro-American stance. Cuba and Venezuela -- no friends to the United States -- are promoting radicalism and attempting to subvert the democratic governments in the region. Indeed, Venezuela is actively lobbying local legislators in Central America to vote against CAFTA.

This can and must be a time of tremendous promise for Central America if we seize the opportunities that CAFTA represents. No one can know the future with certainty. But if the United States and its neighbors continue to strengthen ties, this "magic moment" for Central America could become an historic turning point: an era when a fast-evolving region of 47 million people achieved greater prosperity and found firm footing as a true partner and friend of the United States.

The coming vote on CAFTA is a national security vote. Let there be no doubt.

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